

Letter from St. Petersburg

by Elizabeth Walton Vercoe

When Richard Cameron-Wolfe, head of the Center for Soviet/American Musical Exchange (CESAME), offered to take some of my scores to St. Petersburg for consideration for the 1993 spring music festival, I was delighted as I had just heard Moscow composer Armen Shakhbagyan's stunning *Third Symphony* and emigré critic Maya Pritsker's fascinating description of the broad role of Russian critics and musicologists. Given that my daughter would be living there too, there seemed to be every reason for this to be the moment to visit Russia as so many American musicians have in the last few years. An invitation from the Composer's Union (necessary for a visa) was forthcoming, a piece was chosen, and I found myself leaving warm and sunny Boston and London for a Russia that was still windy and snow-dusted in mid-April.

The Composer's Union had a car and my daughter waiting for me at the airport, just the beginning of their many kindnesses to visiting composers that included hotel accommodations (for those without daughters to stay with), tours of the city with interpreters in the appropriate language, champagne and caviar receptions after concerts, tickets to other festival events, and assistance with arranging rehearsals and translating program notes.

Although the largess for Russian artists and cultural organizations is fast dwindling, the remnants are still impressive to Americans fresh from news of the annual assault on the meager NEA budget. Both St. Petersburg and Moscow, for example, have a House of Composers intended as living and working space for composers. Moscow's House of Composers is a short walk from Red Square and has been home to many well-known composers including Shostakovich. The St. Petersburg Composers's House is just steps away from the monumental St. Isaac's Cathedral where one can stand through services celebrated by elaborately robed priests amidst the malachite columns and mosaic icons. St. Petersburg offers many excellent venues for concerts, but the Composer's House offers one of the handsomest, a real European salon with brocaded walls, carved wooden decorations, and portraits of Glinka and Mussorgsky on the walls. Many of the festival concerts, including mine, were in this lovely hall.

The St. Petersburg Musical Spring is a little overwhelming with its ballets, symphonic and choral concerts, recitals, chamber programs, and scholarly papers. Arriving after the first weekend, I missed the opening concerts which already included a program of St. Petersburg choral music, a symphonic concert with Bartok and Stravinsky as well as Slonimsky and Basner, a program of string quartets by Yury Falk, and one of works by Israeli composers performed by Israeli musicians. Twentieth century classics by Ravel, Schoenberg and others that dotted these and later programs were invariably welcome breaks from the interesting but often demanding new works. There was also a two day

conference of musicologists on twentieth century national music, an example of the keener interest displayed by Russian music historians in current music than by most of their American counterparts.

Although works by women were scarce, the European Association of Women Composers sponsored an entire program of women's music performed by a contingent of German musicians. This concert provided a hearing of Elena Firsova's eloquent *Sonata* for cello and piano, one of only two Russian women's works on the festival. The concert also included a set of virtuoso piano variations by Ilse Fromm-Michael, Sigrid Ernst's evocative two-performer piano pieces (with the composer playing on the strings of the piano with mallets and fingers), three short pieces by Nadia Boulanger, and Rebecca Clarke's viola sonata arranged fairly successfully for cello. My own piano fantasy was expertly performed the next evening by a young Russian pianist, Victor Vysotsky, along with songs by Berg and Schoenberg, cello works by Sokolov and Anselm, and the engrossing seventh quartet of Tashkent composer, Lucian Prigozhin beautifully performed by the quartet from the St. Petersburg Philharmonia. Frustrating double and triple billings had events such as the St. Petersburg State Orchestra performing vocal and symphonic music the same evening.

Another evening my daughter and I and several other composers were invited by Sergei Slonimsky (nephew of Nicholas, perhaps best known to many of us for his *Dictionary of Musical Invective*) to a performance of his opera on Mary Stuart at the beautiful Mussorgsky (or Mali) Theater. We met with the director of the company and the librettist to hear about the repertoire of the company and practical considerations in running the theater before being ushered to our seats in what was once the royal box. *Mary Stuart* is clearly a popular work, playing to sold-out houses for some years, but is also a curious one—containing a mixture of folk elements, archaic sounds, sometimes simplistic set pieces but all written effectively and idiomatically for the singers and orchestra. The pastiche of styles is a characteristic of some recent Russian music that many composers found bewildering at Sarah Caldwell's huge festival of Russian music and a smaller Soviet/American Exchange in Boston a few years ago. In turn, many of the Russian composers expressed their bewilderment at our music, often finding it too intellectual, too dispassionate. Some of the composers also spoke of their colleagues searching for ways to compromise without being compromised, for ways to deal with the politics of the union, perhaps explaining the proliferation of folk music in some new works in recent years.

Playing hooky from the festival to see an unforgettable performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by the Kirov Ballet, we missed several flute, piano and organ recitals. The next evening was the final concert performed by the St. Petersburg Philharmonia (or the Symphony Orchestra of the St.

Petersburg Shostakovich Philharmonia, to be complete). Prigozhin's *Tragic Poem* (1992) opened the program. It is a well-conceived, well-crafted piece with an ominous beginning and surprising solo violin ending. Program notes indicate that the work is about the feelings experienced by the artist and the country during the August, 1991 coup attempt. A second premiere following the Rachmaninoff *Piano concerto #1* was Gennady Banschikov's compelling *Symphony #3* (1986) in two movements. Ravel's *Waltz* concluded the evening. All was conducted with skill and panache by a very impressive Ukrainian woman conductor, Victoria Zhadiko, a winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition. We saw no other women conductors during the festival.

A ten-day blitz of ballets, concerts and scholarly papers presenting over three dozen foreign composers and another three dozen Russians, the St. Petersburg Musical Spring is truly a major international festival of contemporary music. It is meticulously organized, boasts an 84-page festival booklet of programs and biographies in Russian and English, and presents many of the pieces again on television and radio. (My piece, for example, was broadcast on a special radio program about the festival while I was there.) Some composers also saw reviews of their works, and all benefited from the extraordinary hospitality of the Russians we met. I saw only a little of the Moscow Festival the following week as my piece was postponed due to performer illness, but my impression is that the St. Petersburg Festival is the one not to be missed. Its future is uncertain, however. Like individual artists scrambling for alternative funding in post-Communist Russia, the festival has searched for new support during economic difficulties that we can barely imagine. (Inflation, for example, is averaging about 25% a month.) We can only hope that the list of sponsors will expand from Art International, Swissair and local banks to include a broader spectrum of patrons in coming years so that this special event will be able to continue.

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